

# . Handling Distractions

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*“INTEREST. Here is the key to the whole thing. If and when you are truly interested in what you are doing, or are about to do, then you will center your attention on it with little or no effort, and almost irrespective of the attendant conditions.”*

*-Ralph Alfred Habas, The Art of Self-Control*

**I**t is extremely important to understand that disruptions in the classroom do not just occur randomly but have causes behind them. A teacher's job is to attempt to understand why problems arise and implement procedures in order to reduce these problems. Lack of structure in areas such as environment, equipment, and individuals contribute to disruption issues in the classroom. (3) Preventing distractions helps to decrease misbehavior but is even more effective when replaced by positive teacher statements. (3)

## Preventing Distractions

### Establishing Expectations

Create clear and simple expectations for students in terms of behavior. Set this expectation at the beginning of the year to allow students to experience a “norm” from beginning to end. (5) The more specific teachers are during the instruction phase the less likely that their students will become distracted (6). Knowing how to capture and keep students' attention is a valuable determinant of how often students will be distracted.

### Arranging the Classroom

Finding ways to manage the learning environment in which the students are in will decrease the opportunities for distraction (6). High traffic areas need to be strategically placed to minimize distraction. Student seating should supplement student learning rather than hindering it. Materials and equipment that are frequently used must be easily accessible to students. Many studies have identified teacher interaction with students is connected to student seating location. Those students seated at the front of the room and down its center are more likely to receive attention from the teacher and less likely to be distracted. (3)



## Fostering Classroom Connections

“The findings show that teachers who approach classroom management as a process of establishing and maintaining effective learning environments tend to be more successful than teachers who place more emphasis on their roles as authority figures or disciplinarians.” (Thomas L. Good and Jere Brophy (1994)

Share with students a little bit about yourself and have them share with you what they are comfortable with. This fosters trust and respect between student and teacher, and between peers. Trust and respect help make students more open to learning and opinions.

## Being Prepared

Effective teachers create lesson plans that they use as guides. They create backup plans, in case technology or other dependent material functions poorly. Downtime can open up ample opportunities for students to get antsy. By being prepared, teachers can prevent this unproductive and distracting time of chaos. (5)

On that note, students will pick up on any teacher hesitation or uncertainty. Once they sense this weak point, this will open the door to distractions or disruptions. (5)

Differentiated learning approaches will maximize student interest and decrease distractions. By keeping instruction engaging and entertaining through hooks and variety, students will be more anticipated to learn and less likely to be distracted.

As a teacher you should be aware there are factors that are out of your hands (socially and culturally). Try to be sensitive and aware of these outside influences during your instruction. (6)

## Dealing with Distractions

Regardless of how much planning teachers do to prevent distractions they are inevitable and teachers must be able to react in an effective manner.

## Following Through

Enforce discipline of the rules that you create in terms of classroom behavior. Make sure the rules are enforced consistently for all students. Students can then predict what their everyday routine is, and help limit distracting disruptions, confusion, and chaos.



(17)

*“Teachers can prepare an environment in hopes to minimize the likeness of distractions but unfortunately distractions are inevitable and they will take place in classes of all ages. Mrs. Denise Mochamer is an 8th grade English teacher at Mt. Blue Middle School and deals with distractions on a daily basis. She provided some insight on this important topic. Mrs. Mochamer said that there are many outside influences that contribute to disrupting her class, some of which are out of her control. “From groups of kids passing through the halls, to the intercom going off, or even another teacher just entering the room, there are constantly possible distractors being thrown at you”. She expressed how even though these things are not necessarily meant to cause disruptions (groups of students having to leave for band or a parent calling to ask a question) they still contribute to the distraction level in the classroom. That’s not even including the behavioral or technology distractions! How does she manage it all? Her answer is something that teachers would be wise to adopt. “You have to act as a role model. How you handle the distraction is how your students will”. –Denise Mochamer on distractions in the classroom*

## **DO's and DON'Ts of responding to students:**

### **DO's:**

- Maintain calmness
- Respond in a quiet but firm voice
- Restate clearly and calmly
- Move away from student, giving him or her space
- Look for opportunities to respond positively
- Give the student a choice of meeting the expectation or experiencing a negative consequence

### **DON'Ts:**

- Show signs of agitation
- Raise one's voice
- Use verbal counter aggression
- Repeat a statement over and over
- Plead with the student
- State an unrealistic consequence

(7)

## **Reacting**

When students are not following classroom guidelines, it opens up opportunities for other students to become distracted. Teachers should remind students of pre-set guidelines that they are not demonstrating and how they can improve their behavior. Effective teachers should try to bring students' attentions back to the topic at hand using preventive interventions. (6)

Below are some methods to provide techniques or initially responding to minor classroom disruptions:

- "The disruptive influence of the teacher's intervention should not be greater than the disruption it is intended to reduce.
- An inappropriately angry teacher response creates tension and increases disobedience and disruptive behavior.
- A positive ripple effect is associated with a calm and immediate response to a problem.
- When misbehavior occurs, the first step is to make contact quietly with the student.
- When one or two students are being extremely disruptive, it is best to focus the other students' attention on their task and then talk privately with the disruptive students." (6)

A teacher's response to classroom disruptions should be appropriate, discrete, and positive-minded. When disruption occurs the teacher should gently diffuse the situation. (6)

## **Monitoring**

Teachers should scan the class frequently to ensure that students are focused and not distracted. If teachers disperse themselves throughout the classroom and maintain effective proximity control their students will be more apt to stay on task. If used properly positive reinforcement can act as a motivator for the students who are being disruptive (16).

## Technology and Distractions

Today is the day of the digital era. People of all ages are connecting, logging on, and surfing their many electronic devices for a large variety of needs or entertainments. Students are no different. Think of it this way: “for teens aged 12-17, 78% have a cell phone, 23% own a tablet computer, and 93% own or have access to a computer at home”. (10) Those high numbers could mean that more and more students in today’s classrooms are texting in class, or watching a YouTube video while they should be completing their homework. The nature of technology, the fact that users have so much access to millions of new and exciting information, video games, and social networking sites, means that there is so much material and potential out there for learning and advancement, as well as distraction. (4)

Distraction with technology can seem like a daunting task to overcome within the classroom. How can a teacher beat a small handheld device that could quickly and easily pull up the same information in half the time? This book may be able to offer some options.

### Cell Phones as Hindrances

“More than 90% of students sent text messages during classes,” says Tindell and Bohlander (2012). (15, 2) With so many cell phones to potentially send text messages to and from, it is no wonder students can easily be drawn into their conversations that do not involve the classroom tasks at hand. The ways in which to deal with this have varied from school to school. In some schools, administrators and principals have taken to completely removing the distraction altogether. This means that some places have banned students from bringing technology at all, or have set wi-fi passwords to prevent them from accessing the internet. (12)



(20)

### Cell phones as tools

While cell phones do grant students an outlet for cheating or “virtual note passing,” they also have the potential to expand and enhance student learning. However, to effectively enhance student learning through technology use, there are some steps that can be taken to lower the level of distraction and give students a greater sense of responsibility and accountability. Some schools have taken to having their students sign contracts, detailing the benefits of technology and what the steps are that the student should take when technology becomes too distracting. Another possible option could be the use of seminars and “e-etiquette” classes to teach students when it is appropriate for technology to be used and when it is not. One helpful resource on e-etiquette seminars comes from a [paper](#) by Azad I. Ali. Ali gives tips on how to teach cell phone etiquette to students, as well as some interesting ways in which to use a cellphone in the classroom.

Some effective ways in which to use cell phones as tools are:

- Using programs such as [Poll Everywhere](#) to have students complete surveys, give feedback, or even take small quizzes through text messaging. Answers are then posted onto a webpage for teachers to view and look over from their own cellphone or a computer.
- Having students use the camera function on their phones to take pictures of lab experiments or in-class notes
- Putting deadline reminders into cellphone calendars, using alarms or SMS
- Portable access to internet or wi-fi, allowing for video watching, researching, and note-taking
- Access to [apps](#) that can add even more functionality (1)

### Computers/tablets as hindrances

Laptops and tablets can open up a world of information and distraction, right at a student's fingertips. Not only can laptops access the internet or be used to instant message (like their smaller cellphone cousins), they also open up to higher tech video games, social networking sites, and other entertaining, but potentially distracting situations. Because of this, some schools have instated partial bans using such technology as [Respondus LockDown Browser](#). Respondus will prevent students from accessing any other distracting or potential cheating pathways by "locking" a student's computer when they begin an online test or quiz through one of specified testing softwares. (13)



(19)

Other schools have given teachers the potential to directly regulate what students can and cannot look at during class time, shutting down access to e-mail, browsers, or other distracting software. Some such softwares include the [Lenovo Classroom Director](#). This tool lets the teacher view all students' laptop screens from their own, display a certain student's screen on the board, or even block students' access to video games, browsers, and other distractions. It can also allow teachers the chance to share their screen with students, or give individualized help from their own computer. (9)

### Computers/tablets as tools

When asking students themselves about what they consider the pros and cons of laptops in education, Robin H. Kay and Sharon Lauricella found that students were able to give more pros than they could cons. (8) However, simply giving students laptops, and then not giving them engaging and entertaining activities in which to use them, could contribute to the distraction. One study by Professor Kim Novak Norse, 2011, found that there are "some conditions that promote off-task behaviors." (11)

These conditions can include:

- When any activity occurs for too long (the study says that 4 minutes was the common number)
  - When teachers ask and discuss with only one student at a time, other students tend to get distracted
  - When a professor is “monotone, or, overly uses one linguistic intonation style” (i.e. teachers do not change the inflection in their voice, or show verbal excitement and interest in the topic)
  - When teachers use a pre-assigned order for calling on students
- (11)

## Bottomline

Whether teachers are ready or not, distractions are everywhere. Teachers have options to reduce the possibility of distractions in their classrooms. They should also be aware that no matter how many preventive measures are taken distractions will still occur and teachers need to be able to react accordingly. Technology, whether it is viewed as a tool for exploration, or a tool for distraction, is undeniably included the every day. This chapter has given multiple resources, ideas, and opportunities for handling distractions. Sometimes, giving students all the facts and having them make their own mature decisions about how to handle their distractions can be a great approach. (14) Responsible and intuitive teachers will know and research what approaches will work best for their classrooms and schools and implement those approaches in a way that will provide a pleasant and engaging learning environment.

### *For Further Study:*

- “7 Tips for Handling Distractions”: <http://www.sc.edu/cte/guide/classdistractions/index.shtml>
- Poll Everywhere, text messaging survey website: <http://www.polleverywhere.com/plans/k-12>
- Different article resources for reducing distractions: <http://www.edudemic.com/tag/distraction/>
- Resources for using cell phones as tools: <http://www.teachhub.com/how-use-cell-phones-learning-tools>

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## Pictures

17. Denise Mochamer and student picture. All rights reserved. Used with permission. Available at <http://www.sunjournal.com/franklin/story/1001311>.
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